

Friends Meeting House, High Wycombe

25 London Road, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire, HP11 1BJ

National Grid Reference: SU 87179 92747



Statement of Significance

An attractive Regency town house in the conservation area, converted to use as a meeting house in 1931 and incorporating several historic furnishings from predecessor meeting houses in Wycombe. The building is of high heritage significance.

Evidential value

Although the building appears to date from about 1820, it has only been a meeting house since the 1930s. Nevertheless, it retains some important furnishings and items relating to the Meeting and its history, which are of high evidential value.

Historical value

The Wycombe Quaker Meeting was established by 1687 in a converted barn on Crendon Lane belonging to John Archdale (later Governor of North Carolina). Some of the furnishings from that building, as well as important historical artefacts, are housed in the present meeting house. This building belongs to the late Georgian westward expansion of Wycombe, with ribbon development along the London Road. The meeting house is of high historical value.

Aesthetic value

As an attractive and well-detailed early nineteenth-century town house which makes a positive contribution to the conservation area, the meeting house is of high aesthetic value. This value is enhanced by the historic fittings and furnishings inside, including those introduced in 1931.

Communal value

The building is well used by local community groups, including mental health charities. It is also a positive feature in the conservation area, facing onto the open space of The Rye, and forms part of the approach to the town centre along London Road, where it and can be appreciated by people who may not be users of the building. It is of high communal value.

Part 1: Core data

- 1.1 Area Meeting: *Chilterns*
- 1.2 Property Registration Number: *0013130*
- 1.3 Owner: *Chilterns Area Quaker Meeting*
- 1.4 Local Planning Authority: *Wycombe District Council*
- 1.5 Historic England locality: *South East*
- 1.6 Civil parish: *High Wycombe NPA*
- 1.7 Listed status: *II*
- 1.8 NHLE: *1160300*
- 1.9 Conservation Area: *High Wycombe*
- 1.10 Scheduled Ancient Monument: *No*
- 1.11 Heritage at Risk: *No*
- 1.12 Date(s): *c1820, with later alterations (Meeting House from 1931)*
- 1.13 Architect(s): *Not established; Sam North (1931)*
- 1.14 Date of visit: *5 November 2015*
- 1.15 Name of report author: *Andrew Derrick*
- 1.16 Name of contact(s) made on site: *Julia Wassell, Jennifer Jackson*
- 1.17 Associated buildings and sites: *Detached former burial ground, now Peace Garden*
- 1.18 Attached burial ground: *No*

1.19 Information Sources:

Butler, D. M., *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain*, 1999, Vol. 1, pp. 24-5

Mellor, H. and J., *Seekers and Finders; Quakers in High Wycombe 1650-2000, A Brief History*, 2003

Local Meeting Survey, by Julia Wassell, October 2015

Part 2: The Meeting House & Burial Ground: history, contents, use, setting and designation

2.1. Historical background

In 1687 it was reported to Monthly Meeting that 'Friends have built a meeting house in Wycombe'. This was on Crendon Lane, the property of John Archdale, who became a Quaker in 1678 and went on to become Governor of North Carolina. In 1693 Archdale leased the buildings, a barn and a cottage, to Friends for ninety-nine years, the barn becoming the meeting house (the buildings and land being released in perpetuity in 1726).

The Meeting was discontinued in 1871 and the meeting house was leased to Christ Church, which lay opposite, as a school room. Quaker practice in High Wycombe was revived in 1914, when a 'pilot Meeting' was held in the old meeting house in Crendon Lane, after which a short sub-lease being taken out on the building. In 1921 Monthly and Quarterly Meetings agreed that Wycombe could be established as a Preparative Meeting, and in 1924 the five remaining years of a lease on a former mission house in Corporation Street were taken. The building was adapted and furnishings provided by George North, architect, and his son Sam. When the lease on that building ended in 1929, rooms at The Limes in Easton Street were briefly used. The old meeting house in Crendon Lane was demolished in 1930 or 1931, for road widening.

In 1930 the freehold of a house on London Road, Fairwood Cottage, was purchased from Fred Skull, an antiques dealer, for £1,750. Some sources give this house a mid-eighteenth-century date but it looks early nineteenth-century and the date given by Butler is c1820. It is possible that internal features of mid-eighteenth-century character were installed by Mr Skull. The architect Sam North was appointed to make the necessary alterations for a meeting house, and George North designed some new furnishings. Older furnishings from Corporation Street and Crendon Lane were also re-used. The new meeting house opened in March 1931, with a self-contained flat upstairs (occupied by a warden from 1938). In 1982 a new block providing a kitchen and classroom was added at the rear of the meeting house, made possible by a legacy from Norah Wickens (architect Roy Roe Associates).

2.2. The building and its principal fittings and fixtures

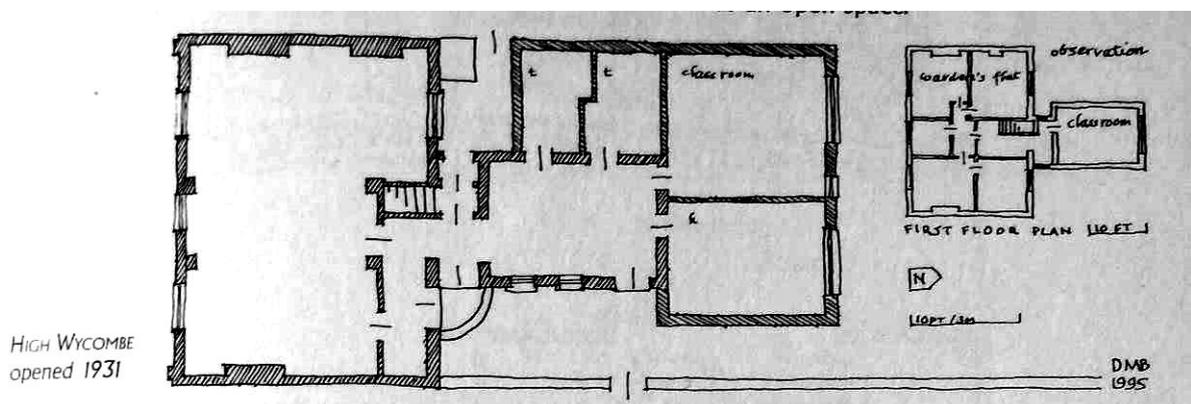


Figure 1: Plan, from Butler, 1990, p. 25

The meeting house appears to be a late Georgian property of c1820, formerly known as Fairwood Cottage, which was adapted by Sam North to serve as a meeting house in 1931 and extended at the back in 1982. The house is of two storeys and three bays, under a Welsh slate roof with timber eaves and chimney stacks at the gable ends. The (south) entrance front (photo top left) is faced in red brick laid in Flemish bond, with fine lime putty joints and corner pilasters. The central door has a trellis porch and a tablet over (inscribed since 1931 with the words Friends House). The sash windows, each of three panes over three, are set in rendered reveals with gauged brick arches over. The side elevations are faced in a mixture of grey and red bricks; there is one first floor eight-over-eight sash window to the first floor on the east return elevation. To the rear is a short lower rear range and beyond this a single storey addition of 1982 by Roy Roe Associates, low-key and contextual in character.

Inside, the original hall, two front rooms and rear room to the west have been opened up with folding timber shutters to create a single meeting space. In the front room (east side) there is a fireplace with eared timber surround flanked by cupboards of eighteenth-century character. The imported furnishings (see 2.3) help to give it a convincing meeting house character.

2.3 Loose furnishings

Along the east wall is a large bench with high back, from the Crendon Lane meeting house (photo bottom left). Other benches were brought from Corporation Street. There are also two coffin rests, one dated 1688 (photo bottom right). Locally-made wheelback chairs were purchased in 1931, and H. and J. Mellor refer (p.69) to ten rush-seated chairs and armchairs made by George North at that time. Displayed on the walls are various archive documents associated with the Meeting, including an order to the keeper of Aylesbury gaol for the imprisonment of ten Quakers (1665), a plan of the burial ground listing some 150 graves, and pencil sketches and photographs of the Crendon Lane and Corporation Street meeting houses. A full list of the displayed archives is in Mellor, p. 93.

2.4. Attached burial ground

Not applicable.

2.5. The meeting house in its wider setting

The meeting house occupies a corner site on London Road, on the other side of which is the River Wye and The Rye, historically pasture land and much of it later laid out by Capability Brown as a park in the grounds of Wycombe Abbey. It is now a public park. The meeting house forms part of a fairly continuous frontage of high status late Georgian and Victorian town houses, set back from the road behind front garden areas, prominent and attractive features in the approach from the east and in the High Wycombe Conservation Area. At the back, the garden is bounded by a brick and flint wall (photo top right).

The detached burial ground (figure 2) is in Station Road, a short walk northeast from the meeting house (at NGR SU 87111 92910). This is reputedly a former saffron field. Leased from 1663 and in use at least since 1682, the last burial was in 1913 (Elizabeth Steevens). It was conveyed to the local authority free of charge in 1937 and in 1944 fourteen headstones were sent to the town cemetery for safe keeping. The high brick wall around the burial ground was demolished at some point, and the site became a car park. In 1964 the council proposed to develop the site, but wiser counsel prevailed, and it was turned into a garden and public open space in 1985-6. It was redesigned as a Peace Garden in 2014, to commemorate the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War. There are no remaining headstones. A plan showing the burials is displayed in the meeting house.



Figure 2: The former burial ground, now Peace Garden

2.6. Listed status

The building fully merits its Grade II listed status, as a good quality, relatively little-altered Georgian town house. The list entry is very brief.

2.7. Archaeological potential of the site

The house belongs to the late Georgian and Victorian eastward expansion of the town along London Road. In the eighteenth century a mosaic pavement was uncovered on The Rye, and twentieth century excavations revealed a large Roman villa and bathhouse. It is thought that this was the centre of a large estate with several outlying farms. Later, the River Wye was important for powering the mills that grew up along the valley. While the site of the meeting house has no known archaeological potential, it is possibly high. See also http://www.buckscc.gov.uk/media/130564/high_wycombe_report.pdf

Part 3: Current use and management

See completed volunteer survey

3.1. Condition

- i) Meeting House: Good
- ii) Attached burial ground: Not applicable

3.2. Maintenance

The building is well maintained. A QIR was carried out in 2012, and its chief recommendations have been implemented: a fire door, security on a window, and improved insulation. There is a five-year repair and maintenance plan.

3.3. Sustainability

The Meeting uses the Sustainability Toolkit. Sustainability measures undertaken include:

- Climate change & energy efficiency: Insulation of lofts
- Resource use, recycling & waste management: Recycling of paper, plastic, glass, composting, food waste, batteries, ink cartridges, clothing, water butt, two compost bins. Hippo bags. Grow mushrooms in cellar. Fairtrade Church status.
- Building maintenance & refurbishment: Recycled wood used for shelf
- Wildlife, ecology and nature conservation: Adjacent to river, signal crayfish reported. Shrubs planted for bees, birds and butterflies where possible. In area for Red Kite.
- Transport: Cycle safety. There is secure parking for cycles, to be extended in 2016. There is no car parking on site. However, public transport is not convenient on Sundays.

3.4. Amenities

The Meeting considers that it has the facilities it needs. As well as the meeting room, these include a kitchen, WCs, committee room and gardens. There is a resident warden.

3.5. Access

An access audit was undertaken in 1995 and is reviewed annually. There is step-free access into and circulation around the meeting house, a WC suitable for disabled people and a hearing loop. No special provision has been made for partially-sighted people.

3.6 Community Use

Friends use the meeting house for about 30 hours a week. Other parties use the facilities for 32 out of a possible 100 hours. There is a letting policy and each hiring is discussed; only not-for-profit organisations are eligible. Users cite the reasonable price, pleasant and peaceful ambience and convenient location.

3.7. Vulnerability to crime

There has (perhaps surprisingly) been significant experience of crime. This has included heritage crime (attempted theft of lead, thwarted by a neighbour) and, more seriously, several arson attempts at the property next door (including three on cars in the car park). Low-level crime and antisocial behaviour is also reported. Although this is a prosperous area with generally low levels of crime, it does lie close to areas of deprivation. The warden attends meetings of the Police Neighbourhood Action Group.

3.8. Plans for change

None.

Part 4: Impact of Change

4.1. To what extent is the building amenable or vulnerable to change?

i) As a Meeting House used only by the local Meeting: The building was not built as a meeting house, but has been adapted to serve this use. This has been at the expense of the original cellular ground floor plan form. There is scope for low-key internal change, provided the surviving original fabric and fittings and the imported furnishings of note are respected.

ii) For wider community use, in addition to local Meeting use: The building has been adapted to serve the needs of the Meeting and wider community use. The constraints on change for additional use are the same as those required for the Meeting.

iii) Being laid down as a Meeting House: The building could readily revert to its previous and historic use as a private house. In that event, appropriate provision would need to be made for the loose historic furnishings of note.

Part 5: Category: 2

Part 6: List description

Name: FRIENDS HOUSE

List entry Number: 1160300

Location: FRIENDS HOUSE, 25, LONDON ROAD

Grade: II

Date first listed: 28-Jun-1973

Date of most recent amendment: Not applicable to this List entry.

LONDON ROAD 1. 963 (North Side) No 25 (Friends House) SU 8792 5/280

II GV

Early C19. Red brick, Welsh slates. 2 storeys, eaves cornice. 3 sashes in reveals under flat arches. Trellis porch. Grey brick side elevation. Central panel over porch inscribed Friends House.

Nos 21 to 25 (odd) form a group.

Listing NGR: SU8718192758